

The War-Torn Societies Project in Guatemala



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[Photo: Faces of Guatemala]

In January 1997, after decades of bloody conflict, Guatemala took giant steps towards a brighter future when the government and opposition guerilla forces signed the Peace Accords. A few days later, after months of preparation involving many different actors, the Vice-President of the Republic and representatives from government, international agencies, research centres, and other key institutions officially launched a 15 month-long experiment of the [War-torn Societies Project](#) (WSP) — a global initiative dedicated to helping war-torn societies rebuild.

"Guatemala had suffered more than 35 years of conflict, with the destruction of human lives, terror, weakened social standards, and loss of values with respect to human dignity that conflict so often brings," notes *war-torn societies project in Guatemala*, a WSP report. "The respect of law, security, and trust in public institutions and officials had been undermined and was still seriously questioned."

Joint effort

It was these kinds of realities that inspired the formation of the Geneva-based War-torn Societies Project in 1994. A joint effort of the [United Nations Research Institute for Social Development](#) (UNRISD) and the Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies (PSIS) of the [Geneva Graduate Institute of International Studies](#), the WSP was established with financial support from the International Development Research Centre and 27 other donors.

According to WSP director, [Matthias Stiefel](#), the goal was "not only to help societies emerging from major social and political conflict to identify ... which issues should be given priority as a matter of policy, but also to explore ways in which the international community could better assist them." Specific objectives for Guatemala included: documenting the country's peace-building experiences, analysing them through participatory research, drawing lessons, and formulating policy recommendations. Moreover, the project aimed to provide neutral fora where organizations normally excluded from discussions could constructively debate public issues.

Publicity platforms

Several discussion fora already existed in Guatemala, but they mainly served as "platforms from which the political and social forces publicized their positions," explains the *WSP in Guatemala* report. "They were usually short, lasting only a day or an afternoon, and did not provide the continuity so vital to dialogue that might lead to consensus."

"WSP, in contrast, offered a forum that soon became the most systematic process of consultation around post-conflict issues," the report continues. "One of the participants pointed out that this was the first project of this nature that ended with nobody withdrawing from the table."

Initial resistance

At first, the project encountered resistance. The WSP was regarded by some skeptics as "a plot to push the peace process down Guatemalan's throats," says Bernardo Arévalo de León, Special Advisor to WSP Guatemala's Project Director, Edelberto Torres Rivas. But it gradually became clear to participants that there was no hidden agenda.

In the months leading up to the signing of the Peace Accords, the WSP team drafted a 'Country Note' describing "the challenges facing Guatemala in the post-conflict phase and recommending possible policy priorities for action." This document, which involved "national and international actors in more than 100 meetings" set the stage for subsequent consensus-building work. The Country Note identified five core issues considered central to rebuilding efforts: modernization and strengthening of the State; social and economic development; administration of justice and public security; recognition of the multicultural nature of society; and international cooperation.

Working groups

After publishing the Country Note in January 1997, the WSP team created five working groups to conduct "collective research" with the goal of reaching consensus around concrete operational policy recommendations. In the months that followed, the working groups produced reports on: the decentralization of decision-making, public security and citizen participation, tax policy, rural development, and the rights of indigenous peoples. These reports were used as background information at various events, including 10 two-day workshops held in communities outside the capital city.

"The results of these local workshops suggested that, in general, Guatemala's centralized public policy institutions tend to lose sight of the diversity of local scenarios and the different realities that exist at the local level. Public policies assume a level of homogeneity that does not exist, and so lack the flexibility needed to fit a social reality rich in different hues," the report states.

Achievements

Among its achievements, the WSP Guatemala team showed that a consensus-building process can improve the sustainability of social policies by making them the "property" not only of the government, but of a broad range of groups throughout civil society.

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